MORE THAN HAPPY
May 21, 2006

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Psalm 98
John 15:9–17

"I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."
John 15:11 (NRSV)

Joy is home. . . . God created us in joy and created us for joy,
and in the long run not all the darkness there is in the world
and in ourselves can separate us from that joy, because
whatever else it means to say that God created us in his image,
I think it means that even when we cannot believe in him,
even when we feel most spiritually bankrupt and deserted by him,
his mark is deep within us. We have God's joy in our blood.

Frederick Buechner
"The Great Dance"
Secrets in the Dark: A Life of Sermons

John Hersey's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *A Bell for Adano,* which was written during the Second World War and which I just got around to reading recently, is about an American major, Victor Joppolo, who is in command of the small Sicilian town of Adano following the American invasion and occupation. Mussolini's Fascist forces were driven out, but for more than a decade, all of Italy and Sicily had been under the control of the Fascists. Major Joppolo is a good man, who works hard to replace the town's bell, which had been taken by the Fascists to melt down for bullets. His first task is to meet with the town's officials: mayor, police chief, civil servants—all of whom had been working with the Fascist regime and who were accustomed to being treated with great deference, if not fear, because of their authority.

Major Joppolo gives them a little lesson in democracy. The Fascist police chief had arrested a woman for disrespect. It seemed that he, the police chief, had put himself at the head of the long bread line waiting for American food. She had argued, insulted him: "You're no longer in charge here," she shouted. He points to his fancy uniform, arrests her, and hauls her into the major's office.

So the major speaks to the town officials, acknowledging that they have been Fascists, but now they live in a democracy. “Perhaps you do not know what a democracy is,” he says.

> I will tell you. Democracy is this: democracy is that the men of the government are no longer the masters of the people. They are the servants of the people. Who pays the men in the government? The people do, for they pay the taxes out of which you are paid.
>
> Therefore you are the servants of the people of Adano. I too am their servant. When I go to buy bread, I shall take my turn at the end of the line. You too must behave as servants, not as masters.

I thought, “Major Joppolo is beginning to sound a lot like Jesus.” And then he said the most remarkable thing: “Remember, you are servants of the people of Adano now. And watch: this thing will make you happier than you have ever been in your lives” (pp. 45–46).

What an interesting proposal: happiness, that illusive goal to which every living thing aspires, that dream, the pursuit of which is written into the very constitution of our nation, that hope that those who know us best—both psychologists and consumer market consultants—say is among the most powerful motivators there is—“You will be happier than you have ever been in your lives” if you become a servant.

That’s not in the cultural script. NPR reported recently, and the story was picked up by news magazines and papers, that the most popular course at Harvard this year is Psychology 1504. “Positive Psychology” it is called, and the subtitle is “How to Get Happy.” Nine hundred students are attending lectures by Professor Tal Ben Sharar, who got happy by taking himself off the tenure track at Harvard because not having to publish makes him happy. The secret to the course’s popularity is its emphasis on a new focus in academic psychology—namely, what makes people happy rather than their pathologies. I want to come back to the course’s six tips on how to be happy. But for now it is apparent that (1) the topic is important, relevant in the lives of America’s brightest and potentially most successful people, and (2), which follows logically, happiness must be fairly illusive, absent mostly, if our brightest and best will pay $40,000 per year to learn how to get some.

There is plenty to be unhappy about, it would seem. The cover of *Time* magazine a few weeks ago showed a polar bear stranded on a piece of melting ice beneath the headline “Be Worried, Be Very Worried.” The morning newspaper and the evening news give us plenty to be unhappy about: the seemingly intractable matter of immigration policy, the ongoing suffering in Iraq and the losses—two, three, four per day—of precious

young American lives, the price of oil, Iran, Palestine, Sudan, the government tracking your telephone calls and denying the human rights upon which this republic is founded and—in the defense of which we send young Americans into battle—denying those rights to its own detainees. There's plenty to be unhappy about. *New York Times* columnist David Brooks wrote recently "Don't Worry, Be Happy" and called himself the nation's sole remaining optimist. I read his column eagerly, wanting more than anything to stop worrying and be happy. It didn't work. He didn't convince me.

There is plenty to be unhappy about in the world around us.

And religion—religion oftentimes contributes to it. In his autobiography, *God Was in the Laughter*, the late David Read, longtime pastor of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, tells about growing up in Scotland and his Aunt Belle, his most religious relative, who looked like Queen Victoria. "It was difficult to avoid God in her home," Read remembered, and it wasn't a particularly pleasant experience. "Morning and evening prayers, endless church services to be endured." God, he says, was formidable, to be regarded with awe if not outright fear. His Scots Presbyterianism was very serious business. He cites a Christopher Marley novel in which a character says about Presbyterians and their religion, "It don't prevent them from committing all the sins there is, but it keeps them from getting any fun out of it" (p.17). We Presbyterians are "God's Frozen People," someone said. And Lutheran scholar Conrad Hyers says that we have a very hard time thinking of God and humor, God and laughter, God and gaiety. "Our God is infinite in gravity," and "when we are most religious we are at our dreariest and dullest" (*And God Created Laughter*, p. 14).

I can remember personally what a jolt it was years ago when I first saw that famous picture of Jesus robustly laughing. I had never seen anything like that. I had never thought about him laughing, never thought about God laughing.

And yet there is joy, laughter, exquisite happiness—more than happiness actually—in the Bible consistently. The psalm we read this morning could not be more exuberant.

> O sing to the Lord a new song. . . .
> Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth,
> break forth into joyous song. . . .
> Let the hills sing together for joy.

The prophet Isaiah describes the returning exiles "crowned with everlasting joy: joy and gladness shall overtake them."

When the wise men saw the star they “rejoiced exceedingly with great joy,” and when the angels appeared to the shepherds, they announced “good news of a great joy which shall come to all the people.”

On his way to his own martyrdom, St. Paul wrote, “Rejoice, in the Lord, always; again I say, rejoice.”

And our text this morning from the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of John. It’s hardly a happy occasion. It’s the occasion of Jesus’ betrayal, the night of his arrest, the last supper on the evening before his death, and there is every indication that Jesus knew exactly what was transpiring. What he says to his disciples on that occasion is known as the farewell discourses. It is a serious, somber moment: “You are my friends. . . . You did not choose me; I chose you—abide in my love. . . . I have said these things to you that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”

Jesus was not happy. Surely he was concerned about the future. Just a few hours later he would bare his heart and soul to God in the garden of Gethsemane and plead for deliverance from the prospect of torment and pain and death. Who wouldn’t? And yet, at the heart of it is something remarkable, something unexpected and counterintuitive, something revolutionary and life-changing, something he called “his joy.” “I’m saying this,” he says, “I’m living and suffering and dying,” not that you should be sad, grim, angry, vengeful, determined, but, of all things, that “my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”

No wonder that the devil in C. S. Lewis’s delightful *Screwtape Letters* complains that pleasure is God’s invention and joy is its product. “Laughter,” the devil says, “is disgusting, a direct insult to the realism, dignity, and austerity of hell.”

I think we’re not generally very happy, not to mention deeply, profoundly joyful because we have bought into the big lie—that satisfying our wants, gratifying our needs, will make us happy. I think we’re not very happy because we’re looking in the wrong place, believing the consumer-economy gospel that the more you have, the more you can buy, accumulate, the happier you will be. I think you and I, even though we may be philosophically resistant, still live within an overwhelmingly seductive system that promises, over and over, that satisfaction, happiness, joy—and if you read the ads carefully—salvation is available if you can afford the right attire, jewelry, automobile, spa, and vacation.

Most of us, I think, even when we know better, even when we regard ourselves as spiritual insurgents in the consumer-market mentality, nevertheless keep behaving as if the big lie were true. Consider the matter of time, for instance—and I can talk personally about this. When Americans,

including the Harvard students who signed up for the course on happiness, are asked why they are unhappy, what's wrong with their lives, most of the answers have something to do with time. There's never enough of it. It takes all of our time to do what we have to do and there's none left to do what we want to do. We have to work all day and half the night just to keep up and there's no time left. German theologian Jürgen Moltmann, in a series of lectures he presented in this country, called one of them "The Modern Distress of Time and the Discovery of Slowness." "Never before have human beings had as much free time," he observes, "and yet never have they had as little time." We Americans are running all the time, ever faster from one thing to another. "Homo accelerandus," he calls us and says that "fast food" is the symbol of the fast life we lead.

I read that sitting at the kitchen table in a house in rural Umbria, about as far from a McDonald's as you could be. "Modern homo accelerandus," Moltmann was saying, "eats fast food, has many encounters but few experiences, contacts but no relationships—is always in a hurry." And I began to become a little uncomfortable, remembering the night before. An experience in an Italian restaurant can be a challenge. If you're in a hurry, if you are an obsessive clock watcher, if you don't have lots of time, it's better not to go. In our small village there was one restaurant. We got to know the waitresses. When we entered and sat down, they smiled and waved at us—and then ignored us. We sat for five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes—nothing. Finally the bread and water arrived and then—nothing. I start to look around, fighting the impulse to look at my watch—look at my watch in a way the waitress will see and know that I'm in a hurry. My companion is kind, pats me, and says, "It's OK. We're not in a hurry. There's nowhere to go." Finally we place our order and again, ten, fifteen minutes. We've been here for an hour and we haven't accomplished anything. Meanwhile groups of men at tables around us, couples, families, are laughing and talking. Finally food arrives. It has taken two hours and we don't dare order dessert, because I calculate that will mean at least another thirty minutes. So after asking for the check—and, by the way, you have to ask; it would be just fine with the restaurant if you want to sit there tell dawn—we pay, say good evening, and leave, two and a half hours after we arrived, terribly conscious of the fact that nobody else is leaving, even the people who were there before we arrived, who are clearly there for the long haul.

We laugh at ourselves, but I return to a wise professor who says we're not merely obsessive about time, trying to cram as much as we can into a limited and declining resource; we aren't listening to the Good News.

We're not listening to the psalmist who tells us that creation is good and to be experienced and savored, deeply; that if we're living too fast, we're missing much of what God has given us for the simple purpose of our

enjoyment, our joy. “Only the person who eats and drinks slowly, eats and drinks with enjoyment,” Moltmann wrote. “Slow food, slow life.”

And we’re not listening to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Moltmann wrote, “We can surrender our own finite and limited life to the eternal, divine life and then receive it back again—become calm and composed and begin to live slowly, with enjoyment.” And then this: “A person who is certain of eternal life has a great deal of time.”

It is our sense of mortality, the limits of time, the fear of death, Moltmann says, that manifests itself in an accelerated pace of life, the “time distress” we experience—and the absence of joy.

The Harvard Happiness course offers six tips:

1. Give yourself permission to be human.
2. Happiness lies at the intersection of pleasure and meaning, so do things that are both pleasurable and meaningful (and I confess I wondered whether watching the White Sox humiliate the Cubs two days in a row qualifies and decided it didn’t).
3. Keep in mind that happiness depends on your state of mind, not the state of your bank account.
4. Simplify.
5. Exercise, eat right, get enough sleep.
6. And express gratitude.

Good, helpful advice for harried, hassled, hurried, sleep-deprived people who are always late for the next appointment and eat standing up.

And it misses the one thing necessary: the wisdom of our faith, that you gain your life by losing it; that being a servant will make you happier than you ever have been; that finding someone, something to love passionately, something important enough to live for and die for, will in fact produce joy —God’s joy, the joy Jesus said was his too and that he wants to be full and complete in your heart and mine.

Frederick Buechner says, “We are above all things loved,” and people who know that and believe it and trust it “should come together like people who have just won the Irish Sweepstakes. It should have us throwing our arms around each other” (*Secrets in the Dark*, p. 241).

There are plenty of things to worry about and be afraid of. There is unhappiness enough. But, Buechner reminds us, “at the heart of darkness there is joy unimaginable. . . . Joy is home. God created us in joy and for joy. God’s joy is in our blood.”

“I have said these things to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete,” Jesus said.

All praise to him.

Amen.